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(Article begins on next page)

Mixed Human-Animal Representations in Palaeolithic Art: An Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract: *Palaeolithic art, particularly cave art, is largely dominated by animal representations, described in a remarkable naturalistic and detailed style. This has led to an interpretation of this art as simply a description of the “natural” environment surrounding prehistoric hunter-gatherers. But a number of images and three-dimensional objects are more problematic, because they show not a “realistic” description of natural beings, but hybrid figures in which human and animal characteristics are mingled and interwoven.*

Taking into consideration some widespread cultural representations of hunter-gatherers (especially from the Americas), the scholar is solicited to put into question the usual opposition between a “nature” out there and a “culture”, identified with the world of humans, and consequently the clear boundary line separating humankind from the other animal species. Rather, in the Amerindian mythologies we can find a universal notion of an original undifferentiation between humans and animals: the original condition of both animals and men is not conceived as animality but as humanity. Each species is an envelope concealing an internal human form, visible only to those persons having special powers. The world is a highly transformational one, in which the changing of form and aspect is always possible.

Perhaps these considerations can suggest a more complex and fruitful approach to Palaeolithic art, in which the scholar must be careful not to project on the peoples of the prehistoric past some of the self-evident oppositions derived from our own cultural background, such as nature/culture, human/animal, real/fantastic, and so forth.

Keywords: animals; hybrids; nature/culture; mythology; cosmology.

Résumé : *L'art paléolithique, en particulier l'art des cavernes, est surtout dominé par la représentation d'animaux, rendus dans un style d'un naturalisme remarquable. Ceci a conduit les chercheurs à interpréter cet art comme simplement une description du milieu « naturel » qui entourait les chasseurs préhistoriques. D'autres images et objets tridimensionnels posent plus de problèmes, en ne montrant pas des descriptions « réalistes » d'êtres naturels, mais des figures hybrides mélangeant des caractéristiques humaines et d'autres animales.*

En prenant en considération des représentations culturelles largement répandues entre les peuples de chasseurs-cueilleurs (en particulier des Amériques), les chercheurs sont invités à mettre en discussion l'opposition habituelle entre une « nature » en dehors et la « culture », identifiée comme le domaine exclusif des hommes, et par conséquent la différenciation très nette entre l'humanité et les autres espèces animales.

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Dans les mythologies amérindiennes nous trouvons une conception diffuse selon laquelle, originellement, les humains et les animaux ne sont pas du tout indifférenciés. La condition originale de l'homme et de l'animal n'est pas l'animalité mais l'humanité. Chaque espèce est vue comme une enveloppe cachant sa forme humaine intérieure, qui est visible seulement aux personnes qui ont des pouvoirs spécifiques. Le monde est conçu comme un monde en transformation, dans lequel le changement de forme et d'aspect est toujours possible.

Il est souhaitable que ces considérations puissent suggérer des approches plus complexes et plus fécondes de l'art préhistorique, en évitant de projeter sur les peuples de la préhistoire des oppositions comme celles entre nature/culture, humain/animal, réel/fantastique, qui sont le produit de notre milieu culturel et que nous tendons à considérer comme évidentes.

Since the first discoveries of cave art sites in France and Spain, modern scholars have been surprised by the admirable naturalism of the prehistoric artists. Horses, bison, mammoths and many other animals are depicted, painted or engraved, on the cave walls and ceilings with a remarkable mastery of forms and proportions. The animals represented are generally recognizable at ease, with few or no ambiguity and vagueness. This art works seem to represent with immediacy and efficacy the world of the Paleolithic hunters, living in an environment densely populated by a vast and varied fauna, including many great animals, from which they had to get their own livelihood (Leroi-Gourhan 1971).

The human figure, by contrast, is rare: more common are handprints and geometric signs of doubtful meaning. A naturalistic representation of the human world, of people, family scenes or daily activities is totally absent, while in many cases, like in the cave of Trois-Frères, one finds a strange kind of composite figures: a conflation of human and animal elements. This situation generates a striking contrast between the plainly identifiable animal figures, that cover the major part of the painted walls, and this minority of images which seem strange and unreal. Can we hope to get something of the significance of this images? Is it possible to find the meaning of this stunning difference in the representation of beings? Let's start from a far distant place, from the Native peoples of the Americas. We hope that, through the observation of their way to represent and to relate themselves with the animal world, heritage of a hunter-gatherer tradition which goes back to millennia of years ago, we can perhaps gain some glimpse to interpret the disappeared world of the Ice Age hunters of Europe and Asia.



Fig. 1. Panel from the Cave of Trois-Frères, Ariège. At the centre of many superimposed animals one can find a human figure, with buffalo head and forelegs, who seems approaching a female buffalo, in front of him, with emphasized sexual attributes.



Fig. 2. Cave of Trois-Frères, Ariège : particular of the preceding scene: the buffalo man has something near the mouth, which has been interpreted as a musical instrument.

Although presenting a wide range of varieties in social organization and cultural details, the societies of the Great Plains of North America can be combined in a single Plains culture area, with a number of common elements based on a particular way of life. All Plains cultures were more or less dependent on the buffalo for subsistence and the animal was integrated into all aspects of life: the hides for making clothing, shelter, and containers; the horns and bones for tools, and so forth. The spirit of the animal was important too, as one of the fundamental aspects of religious life.

Unlike the tribes of the High Plains, the Prairie peoples built permanent villages of large, multifamily dwellings, and cultivated corn, squash and beans in their gardens. They inhabited their villages during the planting and harvest seasons and spent much of the rest of the year hunting buffalo.

The way of life led by hunters on the Great Plains is a very ancient one, and it persisted with remarkably little change from Clovis times of 11,500 years ago until the historic arrival of the Old World horse, which diffused north from Spanish sources near Santa Fe. The horticultural groups, furthermore, are latecomers to the Plains scene, for villagers were present for only the last millennium of Great Plains history,

whereas the nomads represent a way of life that endured for more than ten times that period and persisted on the Western Plains even as the Eastern and Central Plains horticultural tribes developed (Wood 1998).

Common to the Plains tribes was a fundamental belief in "power", variously conceptualized from tribe to tribe, which was shared by all living things but which was beyond knowing. Sacred power was acquired through the ritual of seeking a vision, in which men went away from the village to pray for communication from the powers. Fasting, prayer, and in some traditions the sacrifice of a finger joint or other types of physical mortification were integral to the quest. Spirit beings, representing the powers, would appear to successful visionary as a bird, animal, or other natural phenomenon that might then transform into a human. Spirits gave visionaries prayers and songs to recreate the vision experience and tokens of their power to be preserved in "medicine bundles" (Hultkrantz 1973).

This "invisible power" manifests itself in many forms and aspects of human experience that are neither neatly distinguished nor set apart from the daily activities of humankind: hunting, cultivating, making artifacts or going to war. But the most significant interaction of humans with the invisible world takes place outside of the village, in the open space of the prairie or in the woodlands. Here men enter to find game but also to meet the invisible world. The animals play, from this perspective, a double role: they are both the prey, from which the hunters strive to obtain food, skins, and other valuable materials, and the manifestation of a world of invisible forces and powers.

As human beings can obtain from the animals the means by which to create their own culture: food, clothing, hides, implements, ornaments, they need the help of the animals in acquiring power, because humans are necessarily incomplete, wanting, helpless. So humans and animals are not perceived as so different and separate: there is no clear cut distinction between nature and culture. The human world and the animal world are two complementary and interacting dimensions, among which many relationships and intersections are possible. Many mythical tales, diffused all through the Americas relate of primordial times, when the earth was inhabited by extraordinary beings, who shared both the characteristic of animals and of humans, showing how originally human and animal nature and culture was one and the same thing.

This aspect of Amerindian thought has been called "perspectivism" by anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: the conception, common to many peoples of the American continent, according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view. Many indigenous theories maintain that the way humans perceive animals and other beings (spirits, the dead, natural phenomena, etc.) differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves (Viveiros de Castro 1998).

Animals are perceived by humans as animals, but see themselves as persons. Such a notion is associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a clothing) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings, such as shamans. This internal form is the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable as a human

body concealed behind an animal mask. This notion of "clothing" is one of the privileged expressions of metamorphosis. Spirits, the dead, shamans, can assume animal forms, beasts can turn into other beasts, humans can be inadvertently transformed into animals. Metamorphosis is an omnipresent process in the "highly transformational world", as Peter Rivière has called it, of the Native American ontologies (Rivière 1994).

For the Western mind, and for the majority of prehistory scholars, animals are simply creatures that participate with nature and have little or no direct participation in the world of human society and relationship, with the only exception of pet animals. So the distinction between a human culture and an animal nature is something which goes without saying and is taken for granted as simply the reality of things. When many non-Western peoples, by contrast, assume that animals are similar to humans, that they have cultural ways and social institutions, that both humans and animals participate in the same world of persons, they undermine the very basis of Western representation of reality and truth.

In many ways, the archaeological and anthropological studies have tried to avoid the challenge of this stance, assessing that animals and humans are not really the same, that the attribution of the characteristics of a person or a subject to an animal are simply metaphors: the cultural construction of the animal world in the image of human society. But, by this device, as Tim Ingold has acutely emphasized, "the challenge that the non-Western claim presents to Western ontology is conveniently neutralized: it can be treated as 'just another' cultural construction of reality, alternative to the Western one". But, what happens if, following Ingold, "we treat this claim with the seriousness it deserves, by starting out from the ontological premise that non-human animals do indeed participate in the same world as ourselves" (Ingold 1994: XXIII)?

It is likely that the world as perceived by the ancient Ice Age hunters was much more similar to the description of reality shared by many Native American peoples than to the Western perspective dominated by the nature/culture dichotomy. If this is so, then we can get some important consequences:

What is an animal? We cannot avoid to pose this question and to refute taking for granted that an animal is an animal every time and everywhere. There are various reasons to suppose that for the Paleolithic hunters animals were more like the "other-than-human-persons" described for the Native peoples of the Americas than like the natural beings of Western naturalistic thought.

What is that one "sees"? There is no naked reality "out there" to be seen and described more or less in the same way by everyone. We see what our culture has conditioned us to observe and to interpret. For many Native peoples appearances are deceptive: What you see is not necessarily what you get.

What is the human/animal relationship like? Hunters live by killing animals and eating animals for food, but this relationship can take many different forms, not necessarily reproducing the exploiter/resources perspective typical of Western representation. For many non-Western peoples it is a relationship between persons, in which humans do not play the dominant part.

And, lastly, what is the relationship between the animals and the caves? Many scholars have emphasized that the cave itself is part of the symbolic structure and of

the system of meanings constructed by the ancient artists. But the interpretations are varied: from the sacred place, or "temple", for communal rituals, to secluded spaces for vision seekers, from the theatre for initiation rites to the maternal symbolism of the womb.

Here again we look for a parallelism with the cosmological systems of Native America.

Most peoples in Native America conceive the world as a three-layered system. For example, the *Tsistsistas* (Cheyenne) world view places the surface of the earth in the middle zone (*votostoom*), between the world above (*heamahestanov*) and the world below (*atonoom*). Below the earth surface, where the roots of trees and grass end, begins the deep earth (*nsthoaman*), which provides the substance of physical life on earth.

To the realm of the deep earth belong the *maheonoxsz*, the sacred caves, where human seekers of knowledge may be received and instructed by the *maiyn*, powerful spirits. The *maheonoxsz* serve as models for the *Tsistsistas* institution of spirit lodges where shamans conduct séances. The ceremonial structures of the great *Tsistsistas* ceremonies (the Massaum or Animal Dance and the Oxheheom or Sun Dance) are images of the *maheonoxsz* where the original granting of the ceremonies took place (Schlesier 1987).

The most prominent sacred cave of the *Tsistsistas* tradition is located inside Nowah'wus (The Sacred Mountain where People Are Taught), Bear Butte, at the northeast edge of the Black Hills. In the origin account of the Massaum ceremony, two young men are brought into an opening into a mountain side where an old man with a wolf skin on his head and back and an old woman lived. Inside was a large lodge, a *maheonox*, with a sweat lodge on the side. They give to one of the men a young woman as a wife. Then the Old Man let them see animals in the four directions. When the two men with the young woman reached the camp of their people, the hidden animals of the Plains followed them and let themselves be killed. Thus the people was admitted to the grasslands and was given the right to slay animals that lived there (Schlesier 1987).

Many other Plains groups had the same kind of traditions. The buffalo were conceived as originating in the underground world, from which they were brought out through an opening, generally a cave. The Mandan of central North Dakota remembered still early in the twentieth century of a sacred cave north of the Black Hills: from this opening to the underworld bison emerged periodically to replenish the herds, so that the people might survive. Offerings have been found in Ludlow Cave, in the Black Hills, where peoples came to pray and to let gifts to the buffalo spirits. The belief in buffalo and other animal caverns was shared by the Lakota, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Arapaho, Crow and Pawnee (Sundstrom 2004: 81). Examples of the same conception can be found among many other cultures in North, Central and South America. Many rock art sites, like the ones in the Sierra de Capivara, Brazil, though in the open air, seem to represent "portals", openings in the rock surface that give access to the world behind, into the mountain, into the underworld.



Fig. 3. Graved buffalo image, with hoof prints and female signs, from the Cave Hills area, South Dakota.



Fig. 4. Ludlow Cave, north of the Black Hills, South Dakota. The cave was reported to be a sacred sites for the Native peoples of the region and was related with mythological tales who explained that the buffalo went out from the underground world through the cave.

All Plains peoples conceived a sacred connection between the woman, who gives life, and the buffalo, which sustain life and give itself as food. This symbolic relationship was shown in the Lakota tradition of the White Buffalo Calf Woman (*Ptehincalasanwin*), a mythical being who brought to the people the Sacred Buffalo

Calf Pipe, the symbol of unity and prosperity of the nation. After having given the sacred object, the mysterious woman turned into a buffalo calf, of different colors, and disappeared from view, revealing her identification with the buffalo nation (Powers 1986). A similar meaning had the young woman given as wife to the Cheyenne hero inside the sacred mountain by the Old Man and Old Woman. The Wolf Man was *Nonoma*, the term for Thunder-spirit, and the Old Woman was *Esceheman* (Our Grandmother) the spirit of the deep earth. Both are the keepers of the animal spirits of the Plains. *Ehyophstah* (Yellow-haired Woman) is a buffalo spirit turned into a human to assist the Cheyenne. Her parents placed her in the position of master spirit of animals and therefore gave her the power to bring game. The sacred cave (*maheonox*) where the young woman was given to the people was *Nowah'wus*, Bear Butte. The giving of *Ehyophstah* established a kin relationship between the spirits (*maiyn*) and the Cheyenne and a kin relationship between the humans and the animals, under the tutelage of the spirits and *Ehyophstah* (Schlesier 1987). The sculpture on the wall of a rock shelter at Laussel (Dordogne), showing a woman with a bison horn in her hand (Clottes 2008: 74-75), could be interpreted as representing the relationship of humans with the animal world, in the image of a woman bringing to humankind the gift of life and fertility given by the animal people.



Fig. 5. Female figure with a bison horn in her hand, engraving from the Laussel Cave, Dordogne, attributed to the Gravettian Period.

Both the Lakota maiden and the Cheyenne young woman were connected with the light colored skin of a young buffalo, as a rare animal marked with particular signs of power. When one of these animals was killed, the skin of the white buffalo was hung on a pole and offered as a gift to the Sun or the Creator.

The connection of the woman with buffalo was also expressed in ritual. The feast for a Lakota girl reaching puberty was a ceremony during which the sacred protection of the buffalo was bestowed upon her. A buffalo shaman instructed her in the highest ideals of womanhood and prayed for her protection and fruitfulness (Powers 1986). The same sacred connection between the bison and the woman as givers and sustainers of life is also expressed in the Sun Dance, a ritual which most of the Plains tribes still practice today. In the Lakota version, a respected woman is chosen as representative of the Sacred Buffalo Woman, symbolizing the promise of renewal of life force and well being.

The recognition of woman and bison as symbols of the power of generation and of the life force that maintains humans and animals alike is widespread among all the Plains tribes. For them the sky was preeminently a male world, while the female world was connected with the subterranean regions, the world of the deep earth which can be reached through the caverns opening into the mountains. Both buffalo and women were related with the deep earth as the womb of all life forms, and with the sacred caves which opened into the earth and brought into contact with the underground forces.

This symbolic relationship was evidenced by the presence of vulva designs, found near the entrance of caves and on rock surfaces in the Cave Hills and Black Hills of South Dakota, which are very similar to circular motifs interpreted as female sexual signs in Paleolithic cave art, as in the Cosquer cave and other sites (Sundstrom 2004: 88-89; Clottes 2008: 146-147).

The world of the animal spirits was not seen as completely set apart from the world of humans: it was possible to communicate with it in various ways. In all Amerindian mythologies we can find a universal notion of an original undifferentiation between humans and animals: the original condition of both animals and men is not conceived as animality but as humanity, the people populating the origin stories are mixed beings, having both the characteristic of animals species and the outward appearance of humans beings. Each species is conceived as an envelope concealing an internal human form, visible only to those persons having special powers, like the holy man or shaman (Lakota *wičaša wakan*, Cheyenne *maheonhetan*). The world is a highly transformational one, in which the changing of form and aspect is always possible, as in the case of the Buffalo Woman visiting the Lakota or in the tale of the Buffalo Wife, in which a hero marries a woman who really is a buffalo and goes after her to the buffalo country where he is put to test by his wife's parents. A complex set of engravings in the Cave of Trois Frères contains the image of a human with the upper part of the body in the form of a bison, approaching a female bison with sexual organs emphasized (Leroi-Gourhan 1980: 53). It seems to convey a message very similar to that of the mythological tales of the Plains Indian peoples.

"These key images signal that this art does not concern animals as food, hunted by man. Nor is it about animals as dangerous creatures, stalking the landscape. It is at least partly about the relationship of humans to animals who, in Native American terms at least, were called 'nonhuman people'" (Whitley 2009: 169).

The instructions given to the Cheyenne first shaman by the Thunder Spirit in the sacred cave were embedded in the Massaum ceremony, which commemorates the relationship of humans to the spirit world of the grasslands, the sacred relationship

with the animals as expressed through the Buffalo Woman (*Ehyophstah*)'s continuing spiritual presence, and the proper approach of hunting Plains herd animals by calling them into camps and pounds through the work of a buffalo shaman. During the Massaum ceremony, the masters of the animals and guardians of the sacred mountain were represented by two humans wearing a wolf skin, symbolizing both the earth and the sky regions of the Cheyenne cosmos. They could find a parallel in the sculpture of a man with a lion head, found at Hohlenstein-Stadel (Germany) and attributed to the Aurignacian period (Clottes 2008: 54-55), which shows a conception of the relationship between humans and animals permeated by fluidity, transformation and lack of absolute distinction, which is very similar to that found among the Native American cultures.

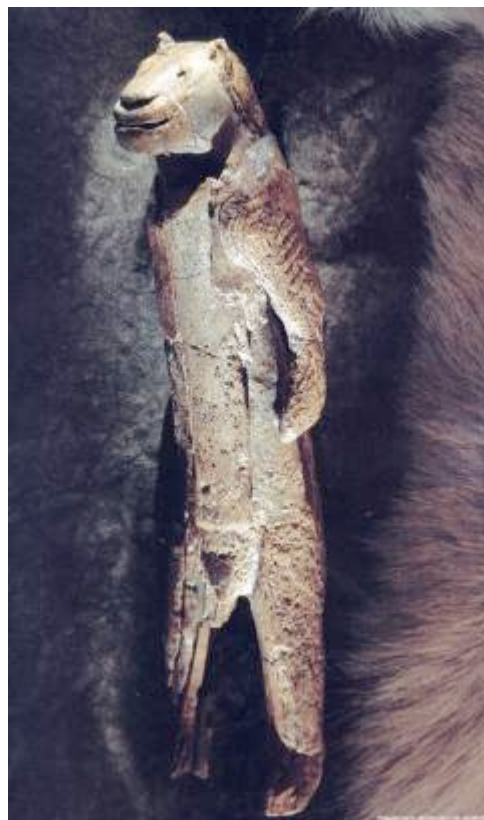


Fig. 6. Sculpture in mammoth ivory of a man with a lion head, from the little cave of Hohlenstein-Stadel, Germany. Aurignacian Period.

The Cheyenne still keep with reverence the Sacred Arrows (*Mahotse*), which, together with the Sacred Buffalo Hat (*Esevone*), are considered as the living manifestation of spiritual power and were given to them by the Creator in the sacred cave. When the people were hungry and had nothing to live on, they had to find a herd of buffalo; then the keeper of the Sacred Arrows pointed the two buffalo-arrows towards the herd. The arrows made the buffalo crazy, they had no more will of their own, but would run in a circle until the hunters had killed all they wanted. The buffalo killed with the Sacred Arrows were to be treated in a peculiar way: the hunters took everything away, except the head, with the horns attached, leaving the backbone attached to the head and the tail. This had probably the purpose of permitting the spirit of the killed buffalo to return in the sacred caves and be reborn again. This

treatment seems the same illustrated on an engraved bone fragment from Raymonden (Dordogne), depicting a bison head and spine with two detached front legs and surrounded by human figures and other signs (Marshack 1972: 207).

In conclusion, what here we would like to suggest is:

- that the approach to rock art moves too often from a uniquely Western perspective of what art, or religion or an animal is;
- that peoples like the Plains Indians are the heirs of a long tradition of hunting cultures, which goes back into a remote past, and has survived into the contemporary world;
- that insights from these cultures can be extremely useful for enriching our view of European prehistory;
- that taking into account a notion like the "perspectivism" of Amerindian cultures and suggesting that it was relevant also for the Prehistoric hunters can give us a more complex view of their arts and artifacts;
- finally, that Paleolithic cave art seems to express less the representation of a relationship of hunters with their prey or of humans striving to obtain a livelihood from an external "nature", than the relationship of humans persons with "other-than-human" persons in a highly complex spiritual, moral and cultural universe.

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